

Tape 294

Harmon S. Sowards  
by  
Ken Sowards

Interviewed by Kathleen Irving on 8 June 2001  
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Kathleen Irving (KI): This is June 8, 2001. I'm with Ken and Marge Sowards to talk to Ken about his dad, Harmon Sowards. I would really like to know about his life. If you remember where he was born, I need to know all those kinds of things; his parents, birth date, childhood.

Ken Sowards (Ken): Well, I can't answer all those questions. I'll tell you this. When you start talking about my father, you're talking to someone who is very biased. I thought my father was the greatest guy that ever lived. The reason I did is because he was such a friendly, warm person and his goal in life was to please people, not disorient them and not to make fun of them. He wanted to please people and he pretty well did this. He wore bib overalls most of the time in his work down at Continental Oil. He would fill his pockets full of candy and gum. When Dr. Spendlove spoke at his funeral, he referred to him as the candy and gum man because every child that I know of he would give candy to and it comes up almost every day when I talk to people. They start talking about my father. I'll tell you, he was some kind of a man.

KI: Now, he was the son of Harmon and Jane Thompson Sowards, right?

Ken: That's right.

KI: I think I found a birth date for him. It was the 22 September 1888.

Ken: Exactly right. In Manassa, Colorado.

KI: Do you know why they moved over here?

Ken: Yes. The whole family decided to move over here. They just wanted a change. They wanted to do better. The whole family, including Harmon Sowards, they don't call him senior, but he was a senior, came over; and his son Harmon; his son Wilbur, Wilbur was a bishop down in Provo for many, many years and ran a grocery store down there close to the university; and his son Harold; and his daughter Vera. He brought them all to Vernal in an old wagon, almost broken down and they had a hard time getting here.

KI: Where is Manassa?

Ken: Manassa is down by Alamosa. The claim to fame of my dad was that he was born where Jack Dempsey was born. He and Van Massey, here in Vernal, knew Jack Dempsey real well. Periodically, Jack would drop by here in Vernal to say hello. I have to tell you this story. One time he got ahold of my dad and he said, "I'm going to put on an exhibition in Salt Lake City. Would you like to come?" Dad said, "Oh, yes!" He said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll get

you four tickets.” So, my dad took a friend of mine, Selwyn Young, and myself and we went to Salt Lake to the old McCullough arena and we saw him put on this exhibition. He was a very, very common man. He took us down to this club.

Marge: It was the old Mint Café, wasn’t it?

Ken: No. I can’t remember the name of it. But he took us into the men’s bar and he said, “Now I want to buy you anything you want. I want to buy you a good meal.” He ordered a T-bone, and my dad ordered a T-bone, my friend with me ordered a T-bone. I ordered a hamburger steak. I’ll never forget. Jack Dempsey says, “Son, you’re in Salt Lake City. You don’t eat hamburger steaks in Salt Lake City.” And I said, “Well, that’s what I want.” Well, finally, that’s what I had.

KI: How old were you?

Ken: I was about eight years old. I can remember it very vividly. Then later on, when I was playing basketball for the University of Utah I went to New York and I went down to his café. I walked in there with all the rest of the basketball players to see Jack Dempsey and they thought I was kind of pulling their leg and I told the waiter that I’d like to see Jack Dempsey. And he said, “Well, he’s a very busy man. I’m afraid you can’t see him.” And I said, “He would like to see me.” He said, “Well, let me check with him.” Well, he found out we were there; he came out there just like we were old friends, from the old people, and he took us back in this huge room and bought us anything we wanted and sent us on our way.

KI: Boy, your stock went up in front of all those basketball players.

Ken: Well, listen. I saw him in the Newhouse Hotel years ago when we were having a convention there, a tire convention. I told all my buddies that when Jack walked through the lobby, I said, “Well, I know him.” “Oh,” they said, “sure you do. Sure you do.” I said, “Well, I’ll show you that I know him.” So they stood there and watched me and I went over and told him who I was and he said, “Oh, my hell. You’re old Harmie’s boy!” This was after the basketball deal back there. I said, “Yes,” and he said, “Well, let me tell you. You just stay right here. You’ve got to meet my wife.” I said, “Well, I’ve got to get in to the meeting. We’ve got a meeting going on.” He said, “You’re not leaving until you meet my wife.” His wife had gone to the restroom. She came back out and he introduced me to her and then I excused myself and went my way. But their eyes just got big. I stood over there and talked to him for a long time while we were waiting for Mrs. Dempsey.

KI: Was your dad about the same age as Jack Dempsey.

Ken: Yes. My dad said he couldn’t whip him in a fight, but he could outrun him. My dad was one of the fastest runners in school. He says, “I can’t whip him, but I can outrun him.”

KI: So how old was he when he moved here? Did your grandfather move his family here, or did he move here and then some of his older children moved here?

Ken: My grandfather moved everybody here. My dad was married before he came. He and my mother came here and settled, found him a job immediately and went to work.

KI: What did he do when he first got here?

Ken: He worked for the old Ashley Valley Co-op. It was the biggest place in Vernal. It was that whole building, however. It had everything: groceries, ready-to-wear, men's, women's, hardware. It had everything.

KI: Did they used to have stairs that went up on the mezzanine?

Ken: Oh, yeah. In the back of it, there was a mezzanine and that's where the offices usually were. They could stand back there and watch everybody down on the floor.

KI: Was he a salesman?

Ken: Yes.

KI: He didn't work up in the office then?

Ken: No, he worked selling stuff. I guess he was a good one. Then he went with Continental Oil Company in 1921.

KI: The company would have been fairly young at that time, wouldn't it?

Ken: Yes. Before his death, he was the oldest living agent for Continental Oil Company. Continental Oil Company was incorporated the same year he went with them, in 1921.

KI: When did he die?

Ken: Well, August 5, 1973.

KI: He just never retired from working?

Ken: No, he never did. Just kept working. He got sick one day and that was it. Worked all of his life. I talked to a fellow who worked for us for twenty years, Shirley Slaugh, and he said that when he'd come back from Salt Lake with his truck, if he got there by five o'clock, my dad would be up on the tanks gauging the tanks. He loved to gauge the tanks. Even at eighty-four he climbed up on those tanks and gauged them. It's not an easy trick.

Marge: Five o'clock in the morning that was.

Ken: Yeah, five o'clock in the morning.

KI: He traveled during the night then?

Ken: Yes. But he was a jovial man and he just gave me anything I wanted. Anything I wanted, I got. But you know what? When I went to school and then got married, I always watched my dad and my dad got sick and was having a struggle with his business. His business was almost down and out.

KI: In the '40s?

Ken: Yes, this would have been in the '40s. I had a chance to go to work for Owens Illinois Glass, a placement program for Harvard. I never did follow up on it because I felt so obligated. My dad had been so good to me all of my life that there was no way I was going to leave him alone. So, that's why we came back to Vernal. Marge gave me two years that she'd live in Vernal and then we had to go back to Salt Lake. Now, she throws rocks at Salt Lake and wants to live in Vernal.

Marge: I cried when we left Vernal. But we came back.

Ken: We love Vernal. I'm sure you see the disadvantages of it, some disadvantages. But the main thing is, we have a good steady workforce here in Vernal. The people are good people. I talked to the man up at San Francisco Chemical. He's the director in charge of our governmental affairs committee. He says that the workforce out here—he's been to almost a dozen places and been in charge. What's he's doing, he's an expert at when they have to take this kind of rock up here and separate it from the stone and the other dirt, then send it to be refined, and he said he's never been to a place that's had better people than he's had up there. He said they're just so good, and he said, "I would think that Vernal, when they're trying to do something economically, they would really talk about the workforce, because their workforce is excellent." Whatever workers they could get, they're excellent.

Marge: This is interesting. [She is reading from Harmon Soward's obituary.] Your dad served on the City Council for sixteen years, and served as pro tem mayor for a short time. He went on a mission in the eastern states. For fifty-two years he was the Vernal agent for Continental Oil, the longest tenure of any employee in the company.

KI: In all of Continental Oil?

Ken: Yes. When he got to be a certain age, I can't remember what it was, they came out here the division manager, the zone manger and the president of Continental Oil, came out to celebrate his deal.

KI: The number of years he spent with the company?

Ken: Yes. They had a big deal for him down at the Hotel Vernal and it was big.

KI: Can you remember about what year that would have been? I'll bet that was in the newspaper.

Ken: Oh, yes. I know it was in the newspaper. In fact they had a book. He was on the cover of the Continental Oil magazine and [they gave] a complete history of his life. It shows him with that dog.

Marge: They gave him a black lab.

Ken: Yes, and he called it Nig and he lost it when he was going across the Green River to get to Vernal. He remembered that dog, so they gave him another black lab down at the ceremony.

KI [addressed to Marge]: Is there a date on that newspaper article? You said he died in 1973, right?

Ken: Yeah. August 8<sup>th</sup>.

Marge: Wait a minute. Did you read that out of here?

Ken: Right at the top, Mom.

Marge: Oh, August 5<sup>th</sup>.

Ken: Well, that's close.

Marge: 1973. Is that what you have?

KI: I can go back and look in the newspapers. Did they come out when he celebrated his fortieth year with them or his fiftieth?

Marge: 1973 was when he passed away. They probably had that ten years, didn't they, or so before he passed away?

Ken: Yes. I think they celebrated his fiftieth year with Continental Oil.

KI: Would that have been 1971 then?

Ken: Yes.

KI: You said that he was on the City Council for sixteen years. What other kind of involvements did he have? Was he in the Chamber of Commerce?

Ken: Yes. He was a charter member of the Chamber of Commerce. I represented him, but he was a charter member of the Chamber of Commerce. He was on the Draft Board when they formed the Draft Board to draft the fellows to go into World War II. He was always involved in some civic activity.

Marge: He was a charter member of the Vernal Lions and he was also president.

Ken: That was back when the Lions Club did things. They don't do anything now. I'm telling you, we've got to get the young people enthused about working. But my dad was a regular buzz saw. He got up at four o'clock in the morning, had his breakfast and was down there to work at five. If he was supposed to meet anybody down there, it didn't matter if it was midnight or when it was, he met them. He really enjoyed his work.

KI: At the height of the business, how many people did he employ? How many trucks did he have?

Ken: Well, at the height of the business, we had something like twenty-seven of these big trucks, these semis, so that would mean we had to have sometimes two people to run those things. I imagine we had about fifty employees.

KI: And you served the whole Basin or was it farther than this?

Ken: Yes, just the Basin.

KI: Did you serve the oil field business?

Ken: Oh, yes. When I came home from the service, I spent nine-tenths of my time over into Rangely. The Rangely boom had just started when I came home from the service. My dad was sick and we were about broke and I went over and worked that thing over in Rangely and I picked up more business than we could handle, really. But we handled it.

KI: Then your brother, Glade, eventually took over that business, right?

Ken: Yeah. I don't know why he got preference on that.

KI: Is he younger than you?

Ken: Eight years. He took the business over and I went into the tire business.

KI: Was your dad involved in any church work that you remember?

Ken: Oh, yeah. He was involved. I don't know what positions he held in the [LDS] Church, but he was a good Church member. And my mother was a very good Church member.

KI: What was your mom's name again?

Ken: Ida. Ida Rebecca Sowards.

KI: What was her maiden name?

Ken: Her maiden name was Jensen.

KI: Do you know how they met?

Ken: How my dad and mother met? Nope.

KI: Were they from the same community, from Manassa?

Ken: Oh, yeah, from Manassa.

KI: So, they might have met at school or something?

Marge: I'm sure. He [Harmon] was on the Uintah Stake High Council.

Ken: The only thing I can tell you about my mother is that she was a very loving person. She was an excellent mother and teacher.

KI: Did she teach professionally at a school?

Ken: No, she did not. But I'll tell you, she was good. She wanted to have me go on a mission, which I never did, but she was a very, very staunch LDS Church member. She lived it right down to the "T". She was good to everybody. She put more confidence and more faith in me than I could ever get from anybody else. If I started anything, she wouldn't let me quit.

She used to tell me the story about Christ. "Sure we don't see him, sure we don't feel him, but if you have the faith, he's here and he will transmit your prayers to God or vice versa and you don't have to worry about it." She was very good that way.

Another thing that I have to respect her for is that when she was five years old, she was shuttled off to the one aunt that didn't have any children, one of Christian's wives. She had to live there for a long time before she even got to go to her mother. This bothered her, but when I asked her about polygamy, she said, "Well, son, I was for it and you can think how you want about it, but that's one way that the Church got their members is by a man having more than one wife and having more children. I am convinced that it was right and even though it hurt me, I have my feelings and my principles." I respected my mother for that very much.

She was just the sweetest lady. She had to listen to the big dreams that Marge and I had: the big homes and everything else. She knew darn well that we couldn't come through with it because we didn't have any money. We were just dreaming. But she went right along with us, said, "Oh, that would be wonderful." Didn't she, Mother?

Marge: Yes. The foolish things that we said! She'd listen to us and say, "Wouldn't that be nice! Oh, that's a great idea." Never once did she put anything down and I think that's wonderful because your kids come up with some wild ones!

KI: They both sound like wonderful people.

Ken: Oh, I thought they were wonderful.

KI: In fact, all of them, all four of your parents.

Marge: We were very fortunate.

Ken: Yes, we were very fortunate to have parents like that. Very, very, very fortunate.

KI: When did your mother die, do you remember?

[Marge passes a document written about her.]

Marge: I think it will tell you in there.

KI: In fact, I think I have her funeral service. 1958. So your dad was a widower for quite a few years.

Ken: Oh, yeah.

KI: Did he just keep working?

Ken: He kept working and he didn't stay out of the public. He just came right out in the public and just was his regular self, just like he was before, but he didn't have Mom. He had an aunt that was real sweet on him that would liked to have had him marry her.

KI: His own aunt?

Ken: No, I shouldn't say that. *My* aunt, my mother's sister. She always liked my dad and she lost her husband before Mother died. She really made a big play for my dad, then my sisters were just about beside themselves because they didn't want to see it happen. Dad, he'd chuckled to himself because he knew it wasn't going to happen.

KI: You mentioned that it was your dad who told you that your rent on the earth was paid by your contribution to your community.

Ken: "Service to your community, your state, your nation, and to God is the rent you pay for your room on this earth." I think that is a good one. I use that a lot. When I make a public talk, I usually use that. It's a good one, isn't it? And that's what my dad told me. I have to tell the Church people, that's one reason I haven't got more involved in the Church. I was so busy during



those younger years, I didn't have time for anything, did I, Mom? Not even my kids, which is a shame, but I had a wonderful wife and she took good care of those kids and now I've got wonderful kids. Our kids are just absolutely great. We've got a compact, loveable family and they're all for everybody and when anything happens, we've got everybody to help. There's so much distress in families and dissatisfaction that it's a blessing when you get a family that's in agreement with everything.

KI: Can you think of anything else you'd like to tell me about your dad?

Ken: I can't think of what I've told you, I've rambled on for so long.

End of tape.